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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have yielded little knowledge about firearm-related behavior applicable to the "average" youth, either because the research focused on select populations, or because only the most general of weapon-related questions were asked. To fill this void, a study was conducted on the firearm experience of average youths based on results taken from a 1996 survey of male 10th and 11th graders from 53 high schools nationwide. The findings show that the number of males who either carry or are in possession of a gun was relatively low compared with earlier research results. Gun-possession levels were highest for firearms more suited for hunting and sporting uses, were more common in rural and smaller communities, and were related to gun-carrying and possession levels of every type of firearm. However, once the recreational-gun-use variable was held constant, gun possession among respondents declined. Family and friends were the primary sources of guns, and 50 percent of the juveniles felt that they could obtain firearms relatively easily. Criminal behavior characterized only a small number of the respondents, and a few juveniles carried weapons to gain respect from their peers, but for most respondents the primary reason for possessing firearms was protection. (RJM)

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U.S. Department of Justice
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National Institute of Justice

Research in Brief

Jeremy Travis, Director

October 1998

Issues and Findings

Discussed in this Brief: The firearms experience of the average youth based on results from an NIJ-funded 1996 survey of male 10th and 11th graders from 53 high schools nationwide.

Key issues: Previous studies have yielded very little knowledge about firearm-related behavior applicable to the "average" youth, either because the study focused on select populations, or because it asked only the most general of weapon-related questions.

Key findings:

- The number of respondents carrying or in possession of a gun was relatively low compared with previous studies. 29 percent possessed at least one firearm, and 6 percent had carried a gun outside the home.
- Gun possession levels were highest for firearms more suited to hunting and sporting uses. 2 in 10 for regular rifles and shotguns, 1 in 10 for revolvers, 1 in 25 for automatic or semiautomatic handguns, and only 1 in 50 for sawed-off shotguns.
- Recreational gun use, more common in rural and smaller communities, was related to gun-carrying and possession levels of every type of firearm.
- Gun carrying and possession were more prevalent in smaller communities. However, once the recreational gun use variable was held constant, gun possession among respondents declined, no effect was seen on gun-carrying levels.

continued

High School Youths, Weapons, and Violence: A National Survey

by Joseph F. Sheley and James D. Wright

Recent shootings by students of peers and teachers in school settings, where such events were markedly unexpected, have provoked fear and outrage in America. For many, the "youth-gun problem" seems to be spreading beyond inner cities to suburbs and small towns and from "bad boy" cultures (i.e., those characterized by relatively high poverty, crime, unemployment, and school dropout rates) to "good boy" cultures (characterized by fewer such social ills). Yet, generalizable and systematic knowledge about gun-related violence among youths is relatively scarce. Most national studies to date have asked only the broadest questions about weapon-related behavior. Studies using more select samples have provided more information but, in turn, have been hampered by questions of generalizability. The most detailed studies available,[1] for example, are based on samples of the most serious confined offenders and recently arrested youths (hardly populations from which to generalize) and students from inner-city schools previously identified as having gun-related problems (rendering questionable the extent to which the results pertain to other students, whether from the suburbs or inner cities).

This Research in Brief examines the extent to which a national sample of male high school sophomores and juniors was involved in, or otherwise affected by, firearm-related activity. Data were gathered by means of a survey mailed to high school students. It sought information on their firearm- and crime-related activities for the 12 months prior to the survey as well as social, demographic, and personal information for each respondent. (The survey contents and goals are described more fully in "The Tulane University National Youth Study, see page 4.")

Despite what is likely a partial "good boy" bias in the sample (see Methodology), the present study is the first to pose reasonably indepth questions to youths from a broad range of social and geographic environments about exposure to weapons.

Methodology

A random sample of 132 sites was drawn from a national listing of high schools in the United States.[2] Of these, 53 (40 percent) consented to participate in the project. The participating schools were compared with nonparticipating schools across numerous variables (e.g., region,

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Issues and Findings

continued

- Fifty percent of the juveniles surveyed felt that they could obtain firearms relatively easily.
- Family and friends were the primary sources of guns (by either giving, lending, or selling the gun). Few juveniles had asked someone to purchase a gun for them from legal or illegal sources.
- Although gun-related activity was associated with crime-, drug-, and gang-related activity, criminal behavior characterized only a small number of the respondents. The average juvenile was not seriously involved in criminal activity.
- Theft was committed by juveniles (14 percent) more often than were burglary (8 percent) and armed robbery (2 percent).
- A few juveniles reported that they carried weapons to gain respect from their peers (a form of status enhancement). While this was rare, the search for status enhancement increased the likelihood of carrying weapons.
- For the majority of respondents, the primary reason for carrying or possessing firearms was protection, not criminal activity or status enhancement.
- The majority of school administrators recalled incidents involving guns on school grounds in the past 3 years, but only 2 percent considered guns a serious problem on school grounds.
- Most schools had implemented some violence-limiting measures.

Policy implications: To reduce gun-related violence among youths, policymakers need to focus on reducing the likelihood that youths will become involved with firearms, that is, focus on the antecedents to firearm-related behavior.

Target audience: Law enforcement administrators, school officials, criminal justice policy researchers and practitioners, and community groups that work with youths.

grades offered, size of enrollment, and public or private status) and characteristics of the cities and towns in which they were located (e.g., city size, racial and ethnic population distributions, age and gender distributions, average educational attainment level, income characteristics, employment distribution, percent in poverty, and crime levels). In all but one instance (a slight difference in upper age distribution, ultimately inconsequential), no significant differences were apparent between those schools that consented to the survey and those that did not participate.

Completed surveys were received from 734 students—45 percent of the original sample. The inability of most schools to conduct followup mailings of the survey in an effort to increase response rates and the fact that the sampling procedure was unable to reach dropouts (who were more likely to be delinquent) potentially produced a "good boy" bias in the sample. To check this possibility, the same survey was administered (with a better than 90-percent response rate) to randomly drawn, comparative samples of male 10th and 11th graders on site at three of the schools in our sample. Onsite respondents differed significantly (always in the more problematic direction) from mailed-survey respondents in the following areas:

- School performance.
- Shooting and beating victimizations off school grounds.
- Use of knives to threaten others.
- Ownership of automatic or semiautomatic handguns.
- Gun carrying outside the home.

They did *not* differ in the following areas:

- Victimizations on school property.
- Victimizations involving knives.
- Arrest history.
- Involvement in theft, burglary, armed robbery, and assault with a gun or knife.
- Drug use or sales.
- Gang membership.
- Ownership of regular rifles, automatic or semiautomatic rifles, shotguns and sawed-off shotguns, and revolvers.

Thus, while a "good boy" bias seems apparent in the sample, it is not so radical as to render the sample free of delinquency and related problems. Indeed, this sample likely more closely approximates the population of *average* American teenagers than have the select samples of most prior studies that examined youths and their exposure to firearms.

Respondent characteristics

Respondents in the present study tended to be between 16 and 18 years of age (97 percent), white (70 percent), and living with both parents (61 percent), in single-family homes (81 percent), distributed evenly across the commonly recognized regions of the country. The respondents' adult head of the household was likely to have at least a high school education (81 percent) and to receive no government assistance (86 percent). The majority of respondents (90 percent) lived in towns and cities with fewer than 100,000 residents; 1 in 10 respondents lived in a town with 2,500 or fewer residents. The average respondent attended public school (87 percent); most schools enrolled between 1,000 and 2,500 students (53 percent). Seven of every 10 respondents described their grades as "mostly" Bs or Cs (73 percent). The average respondent missed school no more than once monthly (68 percent), had never been expelled or suspended (67 percent), and

anticipated graduating from high school (94 percent) and immediately enrolling in college (61 percent).

Fourteen percent of the sample reported having committed a theft, 8 percent a burglary, and 2 percent an armed robbery during the past 12 months. Five percent reported the use of a "hard" drug and 3 percent the sale of a "hard" drug.[3] Only 3 percent of the respondents received composite "delinquency scores" (i.e., summing involvement in the behaviors previously noted) exceeding 2 within a range of 0 to 15 (i.e., "never" to "many times" for all offenses). Finally, 8 percent of the respondents reported a gang affiliation. In sum, the average respondent was not seriously involved in criminal activity.

Gun possession and carrying

As the findings in exhibits 1 and 2 indicate, levels of gun possession and carrying among the respondents in this study were relatively low, at least compared with levels reported by more select samples in prior studies, which focused on males with higher delinquency rates.[4] Overall, 3 in 10 respondents (29 percent) possessed at least one firearm (see exhibit 1), and 8 percent possessed three different types of guns. Moving from an examination of firearms that are more suited to hunting and sporting uses (i.e., regular rifles and shotguns, each possessed by about 2 in 10 respondents), we find that fewer than 1 in 10 respondents possessed a revolver (which could be a recreational weapon), 1 in 25 an automatic or semiautomatic handgun (less likely to be a recreational weapon), and 1 in 50 a sawed-off shotgun (very unlikely to be a recreational weapon).

Exhibit 1: **Firearm Possession Among High School Males, 1996**

Type of Firearm	Percentage of Respondents (N=730)
Any type of gun	29
Regular rifle	19
Automatic or semiautomatic rifle	8
Regular shotgun	18
Sawed-off shotgun	2
Revolver	7
Automatic or semiautomatic handgun	4
3 or more types of guns	8

Note: Timeframe is past 12 months. Multiple responses permitted.

Gun-carrying behavior was rarer than ownership or possession (see exhibit 2). Six percent of the respondents reported carrying a gun outside the home (including in the car) during the past 12 months—4 percent "now and then" and 2 percent "most" or "all" of the time. Among gun carriers, the majority (59 percent) more likely did so in the car than directly on the person (41 percent). When a gun was carried outside the home by a respondent, it most likely was an automatic or semiautomatic handgun (50 percent) or a revolver (30 percent).

Exhibit 2: **Youths Carrying Firearms, 1996**

Setting, Frequency, and Type of Firearm	Percentage of Respondents	(N)
Carried gun outside home within past 12 months		(731)
Never	94	
Only now and then	4	
Most or all of the time	2	
Carrying vs. keeping guns in a car (for those who reported carrying a gun)		(39)
More likely to carry gun	41	
More likely to keep gun in car	59	
Most common type of firearm carried (for those who reported carrying a gun)		(30)
Regular rifle	3	
Automatic or semiautomatic rifle	3	
Regular shotgun	7	
Sawed-off shotgun	7	
Revolver	30	
Automatic or semiautomatic handgun	50	

Urban, suburban, and rural differences

Generally, respondents in smaller communities more frequently possessed most types of firearms. This was especially true of rifles (including automatic or semiautomatic rifles) and shotguns, although not of sawed-off shotguns. Students from schools located in rural settings were more likely to possess revolvers, although automatic or semiautomatic handgun possession was statistically no more likely

to occur in smaller than in larger communities. Gun carrying also was more likely to occur in smaller than in larger communities.

Ease of access to firearms

The findings do little to dispel the common perception that juveniles can obtain firearms relatively easily. First, 50 percent of the present respondents reported that obtaining a gun would be "little" or "no" trouble if they desired one; half rated the task as "a lot of trouble" or "impossible." Second, those who had carried a handgun outside the home during the past 12 months were asked where they obtained the handgun. Forty-eight percent had been given or loaned the gun by a family member or friend, and 4 percent reported sneaking the gun from home. Six percent had stolen or traded something for the gun, while 7 percent had used other, unspecified means of acquisition. The remaining 35 percent stated that they had bought the gun (average price, $112), most commonly from a family member or friend (53 percent of purchasers). Importantly, few respondents (5 percent) claimed to have asked someone to purchase a gun (type not specified) for them from either legal or illegal sources during the past 12 months.

Recreational gun activity

Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency (0 through 8 or more times), during the past 12 months, with which they had gone hunting or gone to a range for target shooting. The items were moderately correlated (r=0.452; as the hunting score rose, so also did the target-shooting score) and were summed with combined scores ranging from 0 to 16. Sixty-one percent of the respondents received a score of 0, and 17 percent received scores of 7 through 16. As expected, the recreational firearm score was negatively, though only modestly, linked to the respondent's community setting. As size of city or town decreased, the recreational firearm score increased (r=-0.171); as neighborhoods were less urban in nature, the recreational firearm score increased (r=-0.240). Not surprisingly, the score was related to region of the country in which the respondent resided. Higher scores appeared for the respondents from the North Central, South Central, and Mountain States; lower scores characterized respondents from the New England/Mid-Atlantic, South Atlantic, and Pacific Coast States.

Recreational use of firearms among the present sample was associated at statistically significant levels with possession of every type of firearm of interest in this study and with carrying firearms outside the home. Importantly, however, the recreational firearm score was unrelated to any of the criminality measures (crime-, drug-, and gang-related activity) employed in this study, to measures of status enhancement involving weapons (e.g., carrying guns to gain respect from peers), and to indicators of high levels of exposure to dangerous environments (where gun carrying could be motivated by a perceived need for self-protection).

To gain a sense of the potential for distortion in reports of firearm-related activity when recreational firearm users are included in research samples, a restricted sample (N=433) was created by removing those respondents who registered a score higher than 0

The Tulane University National Youth Study

This project asked participating schools to facilitate the distribution of a mailed survey to a sample of 10 percent of their male 10th and 11th graders in the spring of 1996. Each potential respondent received a package with the following:

- A letter describing the study and guaranteeing confidentiality
- A copy of the survey (containing primarily forced-choice items)
- A postage-paid return envelope
- A ticket that, when completed and returned with the survey, granted the respondent eligibility to win 1 of 10 cash prizes of $100 to be awarded through a drawing

The survey items asked respondents to answer questions about the following:

- Demographic characteristics
- Family living situations
- Educational situations and aspirations
- Drug, criminal, and gang activities (for the 12 months prior to the survey)
- Crime- and violence-related characteristics of family and friends
- Social and recreational activities
- Exposure to violence generally
- Personal victimization history
- Possession of and activities related to firearms (for the 12 months prior to the survey)

Survey details are available in *High School Youth, Weapons and Violence: A National Survey of Weapon-Related Concerns, a Final Report to National Institute of Justice* by Joseph F. Sheley and James D. Wright, May 1998.

Exhibit 3: ***Firearm Possession for Entire Sample and for Restricted Sample Without Recreational Gun Users***

Type of Firearm	Percentage in Possession: Entire Sample (N=730)	Restricted Sample (N=433)
Any type of gun	29	13
Regular rifle	19	8
Automatic or semiautomatic rifle	8	2
Regular shotgun	18	4
Sawed-off shotgun	2	1
Revolver	7	3
Automatic or semiautomatic handgun	4	3
3 or more types of guns	8	2

Note: Restricted sample refers to respondents with no recreational firearms orientation. Multiple responses permitted.

for the recreational firearm score (39 percent of the sample). The amount of gun carrying outside the home was essentially the same among respondents in the restricted sample as among the entire sample but, as indicated in exhibit 3, levels of firearm possession for the restricted sample were considerably lower (at least 50 percent less) than those indicated for the entire sample. The single exception to this pattern involved the possession level of automatic or semiautomatic handguns, which only dropped 25 percent.

It seems, then, that researchers surveying sample populations in high recreational gun-use areas (likely more rural in nature) without simultaneously collecting data on recreational gun possession, run the risk of inflating the estimate of nonrecreational gun possession. The likelihood of overestimating the level of nonrecreational use or possession of firearms in areas less rural seems significantly lower. Indeed, once recreational gun users were taken into account, most of the significant relationships between the respondents' environments (e.g., residential and school populations) and various weapon-related behaviors and characteristics no longer held.

Illegal activity, status enhancement, and firearms

As noted previously, crime-, drug-, and gang-related activity characterized only a small portion of the present sample. Nonetheless, to the extent that a respondent was engaged in such criminal activities, his chances of possession of automatic or semiautomatic handguns, revolvers, and sawed-off shotguns increased. (Criminal activity did not enhance possession of regular rifles, shotguns, and automatic or semiautomatic rifles.) The likelihood of carrying a gun outside the home also increased for respondents engaged in such criminal activities.

Beyond the association between gun-related activity and criminal behavior, a perceived need for "respect" is thought by many observers to motivate juveniles to possess and carry firearms. However, with few exceptions, firearm-related activities were not associated with the need for respect from one's peers among the present respondents. The exceptions, however, are important. Possession of automatic or semiautomatic handguns and carrying a gun outside the home were related to the need for respect among peers. To at least some degree, then, status enhancement was linked to those firearm-related activities—particularly carrying a handgun outside the home—that contribute to the increased use of guns in problematic situations and make the issue of youths and weapons a serious social problem.

Guns as protection

This study employed nine items to indicate the presence or absence of a dangerous social environment for the respondent. The percentages of juveniles who answered "yes" to the these nine items are as follows:

- Fear of violence in the neighborhood (48 percent).
- Weapon carrying by friends (14 percent).
- Attendance at social events where shots were fired (13 percent).
- Firearm- (8 percent) and knife-related (13 percent) threats against the respondent.
- Firearm-related victimization of friends (23 percent) or family members (5 percent).
- Estimated reasonable likelihood of becoming the victim of a shooting (7 percent) or stabbing (7 percent) by age 25.

Carrying a gun outside the home and possession of an automatic or semiautomatic handgun were related to each of the nine dangerous-environment

items. Possession of a sawed-off shotgun was linked to 6 of the 9 items, and possession of a revolver to 5 of the 9. Possession of regular rifles (3 items), automatic or semiautomatic rifles (2 items), and regular shotguns (4 items) were less obviously linked to the dangerous environment in which the respondent found himself.

The perception that a fairly clear link exists between dangerous environment and firearm possession is supported by the responses from juveniles who had carried guns during the 12 months prior to the survey. Of these respondents, 43 percent cited the perceived need for protection as the primary reason for bearing arms (see exhibit 4). Holding a gun for someone was the only other commonly cited reason for carrying a gun (35 percent). Criminal activity and status enhancement were relatively less important factors in the carrying decision.

Exhibit 4: ***Reasons for Carrying Weapons***

Reasons	Percentage of Gun Carriers *(N=40)*
I needed protection	43
I was holding it for someone	35
I used the weapon in a crime	10
To scare someone	18
To get back at someone	18
Most of my friends carry them	10
It made me feel important	10
Other	15

Note: Multiple responses permitted.

Policy implications

The findings reviewed in this Research in Brief, while not derived from a strictly random sample of high school males, likely come closer to capturing the firearms experience of the "average" American juvenile than have many prior studies that focused on incarcerated delinquents and inner-city youths or relied on samples from select sites. While this study may possess a "good boy" bias, it can be argued reasonably that, relative to the average incarcerated delinquent, most juveniles are "good boys." Further, most research indicates that the ratio of "good" to "bad" boys rises as the focus moves away from inner-city populations.

The results of this study indicate the need for policy aimed at reducing the likelihood that youths (such as those sampled in the present study) will become involved in firearm possession and carrying—rather than the more common call for policy aimed at confronting already well-developed firearm-related behaviors among youths. What was found were vastly more students with little or no experience with weapons and violence than those with considerable such experience. Even considering those respondents who subscribed to the recreational use of weapons, the majority of students surveyed did not possess weapons, and the vast majority did not carry them outside the home. Most of the communities from which respondents were drawn for this study apparently had not "crossed the line" into truly unsafe situations. Yet the line was visible in most. Though weapon-related violence was perpetrated by few respondents, many more knew of and were threatened by it. Further, to the extent that violence was known, it was shaped by the same variables that have influenced it in more troubled environments: crime, drug sales, gangs, and the perceived need for protection in a hostile world.

Most schools have adopted the fundamental elements of persuasion against a culture of violence—some combination of deterrence (locker searches, for example) and violence reduction education (teaching conflict avoidance skills, for example). (See "Violence Control in Schools.") However, assigning the responsibility for violence control and prevention solely or even primarily to the school curriculum may be dangerous. Though communities may gain schools that serve as safe havens and permit education to occur, schools are less a source of violence than a place where disputes arising in the neighborhood are acted upon. To the extent that schools succeed in pushing violence off school grounds, it probably will be displaced into the surrounding community. The issue for communities, then, is how to dissuade youths from resolving disputes through violent means, thereby convincing them that weapons are not necessary for everyday living. Communities unable to achieve this goal would turn, understandably, to the criminal justice system for help.[7] The present findings suggest that communities in less dire straits should be exploring policy initiatives that identify and address the *antecedents* of weapon-related activity among their youths.

Violence Control in Schools

Of the 53 school administrators participating in this study, 48 responded to a survey concerning violence at their schools. Differing pictures emerge depending upon whether we focus on administrators' estimates of danger on campus or upon their recollections of weapon-related incidents on campus. On the one hand, only 2 percent considered guns as at least a somewhat serious campus problem, and the perception bore no relation to the urban, suburban, or rural character of the school. On the other hand, 58 percent recalled incidents involving guns on school grounds during the past 3 years, and 45 percent reported that at least one of their students had been shot, on or off school grounds, during the past 3 years. Importantly, an administrator's perception of drugs as a campus problem was highly related to his or her perception of violence as a problem.

Most schools had instituted some form of response to the problem of violence. Use of violence-limiting mechanisms was linked to perception of drugs as a problem for the school and, especially, to school dropout rate, but it generally was not related to the urban, suburban, or rural setting of the school. Responses to the "violence problem" among the schools were similar and not extreme. School administrators reported the following measures to address violence in schools:

Measures taken among the majority of the schools

- Automatic suspensions for weapons violations (96 percent)
- Revised disciplinary codes (81 percent)
- Conflict resolution and multicultural programs (71 percent)
- Revised dress codes (63 percent)
- Locker searches (55 percent)

Measures taken among fewer schools

- Nonpolice monitors in hallways or on school grounds (40 percent)
- Photo IDs for staff and students (33 percent)
- Police on campus (27 percent) or in school hallways (15 percent)
- Extra police patrols around school property (21 percent)

Measures rarely taken among schools

- Video monitoring of hallways (10 percent)
- ID checks at school entrances (6 percent)
- Metal detectors at entrances (2 percent)
- Mandatory "see-through" book bags (none)

In sum, most of the efforts to prevent violence in schools here focused on threats of more serious disciplinary consequences for possession of weapons and on extensions of traditional school behavior control (e.g., apparel restrictions or locker searches). Those schools that moved beyond such measures tended to rely on external control agents, usually the police, coming onto campus to provide security. Few schools had adopted more extreme measures (e.g., metal detectors and video surveillance).

Notes

1. Sheley, J., and J. Wright. *In the Line of Fire: Youth, Guns, and Violence in Urban America.* New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1995; Decker, S., and S. Pennell. *Arrestees and Guns: Monitoring the Illegal Firearms Market.* Report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, 1995, NCJ 163496.

2. The sample was drawn with sampling probabilities proportionate to the size of the 10th- and 11th-grade populations enrolled in a given school. Sampling with probabilities proportionate to the size of the relevant population was necessary to avoid the obvious bias against students in larger high schools.

3. "Hard" drugs refers to heroin, cocaine, and crack.

4. Sheley, J., and J. Wright. *In the Line of Fire: Youth, Guns, and Violence in Urban America;* Decker, S., and S. Pennell. *Arrestees and Guns: Monitoring the Illegal Firearms Market.*

5. Kennedy, D., "Pulling Levers: Chronic Offenders, High-Crime Settings, and a Theory of Prevention," *Valparaiso University Law Review* 31 (1997): 449–84.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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